An Image That's Alive

Conversation on the image worlds of Skinner Releasing Technique & Amerta Movement

with Sally E. Dean, Margit Galanter, Lily Kiara, and Julie Nathanielsz

What do dancers mean when we speak of "image"? What kinds of imaginal experiences—multisensorial, liminal, etc.—arise through our distinct movement practices?

In 2017, Sally, Lily, Julie, and I organized and taught a workshop with Suprapto Suryodarmo (Prapto) in North Bali called The Field of Reciprocity. Strongly situated in the daily life, culture, traditions, and ecology of Central Java, Prapto's Amerta Movement practice, which each of us has deeply experienced, is an embodied study of human and natural presence, perceiving the "moving self" as a multiplicity of changing selves in a constantly changing environment. My three colleagues also share a long practice of Skinner Releasing Technique (SRT), an experiential approach to connecting physicality with imagination, developed by Joan Skinner. The pedagogy of images in SRT serves as a structure of metaphors for kinesthetic and energetic experiences.[1]

Curious to discover how these artists conceive of their relationship to image and dance-making through these two distinct practices, in 2018 I initiated a series of conversations among us. Following are excerpts from this ongoing dialogue and a contribution of images from each. The second part of this conversation will appear in CQ*'s online journal,* CQ Unbound.

[Margit Galanter]

Margit

I'm interested in talking specifically about how images form and have been informed by your dance life, and also how the particular ways of relating to image through your experience of Skinner Releasing and then later through the practice of Amerta Movement have affected your relationship with your moving body.

Sally

So I guess the first thing that stands out was I started with Skinner Releasing, and about the same time I was doing a lot of *butoh* (with Joan Laage), and they somehow overlap. At that time, the experience with my moving body had very much a sense of disappearing.

In order to blend or merge with an image introduced from outside myself, I needed to slowly release tension, and then to "disappear" in order to "become" the image. More recently, I've realized through the Amerta practice that I can merge with an image without disappearing. I have a very specific memory while doing the Ongoing Skinner Releasing Training, after working with Prapto in Java, where I could sense both my body and an image at the same time, which was new for me. Amerta changed my relationship to my moving body as well as how I receive the image.

The other thing is: *Where is the image coming from?* In Skinner Releasing, the image comes through the poetry of the language. In *butoh*, images come through different sensorial experiences and can be nonverbal—looking at a picture in a book, entering a nature environment, smelling a flower.

Prapto's work has both a sense of the dream world and the reality world—there's a sense of more materiality there in the image. I think this was the point when the image started to transform into a costume for me. It was my way of creating poetry, a kind of material poetry. So the image, or the *costume*, came from the moving body itself, as opposed to somebody's words. It became more nonverbal, something I can touch, something I can feel. Images can live in the verbal realm and in the nonverbal realm. I can disappear and the image takes over, or I can sense the image with my body, existing in the here and now.

photo by Mary Peterson

Five of us sharing movement in performance at The Field of Reciprocity workshop's Open Day—*[left to right]* Prapto, Margit, Sally, Lily, and Julie. Our performing intention was to move as *five facets of a crystal*, and the setting is on Prapto's small and potent piece of land by the sea in Tejakula, North Bali, 2017. *[M. Galanter]*

Margit

Could you share your experience of that moment where body and image came together?

Sally

I can't remember the specific image. I don't know if it was ferns, I'm not sure, but the sense of it is a spirally image through my body. At the same time, I could feel and sense, and maybe even see, the bones, the muscles, the tissues, the cells. They didn't feel separate; they just felt more like a unified meeting. It wasn't the body trying to find the image or the image trying to find the body; they were just existing.

I feel it kinesthetically, or in my body, so it can end up being a quality, but it's still an image, and it can transform.

Lily

In Skinner Releasing, what I experienced right away was there was this immediacy of the kinesthetic experience of the image. I could immediately feel it in my body. When I was in dance school, I thought that everybody else had a lot of fantasy. I didn't have those kind of stories, and I was worried about it. *[laughing]*

When I experienced working with anatomical imagery (the first time was Release and Alignment Technique with John Rolland, an ideokinetic approach), it gave me more trust that there is a different kind of sensorial imagination that for me is immediately in the body; not so much a story that I'm telling with my body. So it's more like a poetic approach to me. There is this sense of expanding possibility through images, and this sense of poetic experience in my body as it is, or as it may be. Which then can transform it. This is hard to put in words and beyond what the actual matter of it is.…

Something that came up yesterday when I was in the studio was the *imagination of an image*, because I feel there is a difference between image and the imagination. There are overlaps, but there is a difference actually. Sometimes the imagination of the image is so, in a way, beyond the body that I can feel the limitations of my body, my physical body, moving. And sometimes, like yesterday, I didn't feel those limitations even though I was aware of them in the space. That my arms, like the fingertips, are in a certain place in the space as I move, yet with my imagination, they might be much farther out there. I love it when I don't feel the limitation of my physical abilities. *[laughing]* And I feel also that practicing, for example, Skinner Releasing helps me to be more able to expand my physical abilities.

There is a spaciousness and an expanding. Layers, also. And then there is also the immediacy of listening. Like, what is the image? There is this stillness involved. Or silence perhaps. In the chapter that I submitted for the book about Skinner Releasing Technique, I write about listening and poetry. "Listen" and "silent" have the same letters.

I like what you said, Sally, about how in Skinner Releasing, poetic language is the source of the image. I am in love with the use of poetry in SRT. I keep using the word "immediacy" with what I feel; maybe that's why these images work so well for me.

I realize I don't think of Amerta in image, with image, in relation to image. It's not a first connection I make.

Margit

What would you call it instead, Lily?

Lily

The first thing that comes up is making connections. Or finding the connections that are already there and experiencing them. And what do these connections mean in my dancing life, body, being? People, nature, tree. Sculpture. Me. Sun. Rest of the world. *[laughing]* But then it could also be a connection between an image that I have of myself or an image I have of the world. In that sense, "image" is there.

Julie

An early experience in the Skinner Releasing world, it could have been yesterday: dancing with an image, there was poetic image and there is also touch from another person, which is also a form of image—landing, and taking you, and the body…

But now I'm feeling that the experience is actually of novelty—like a feeling of surprise. There's a thing that

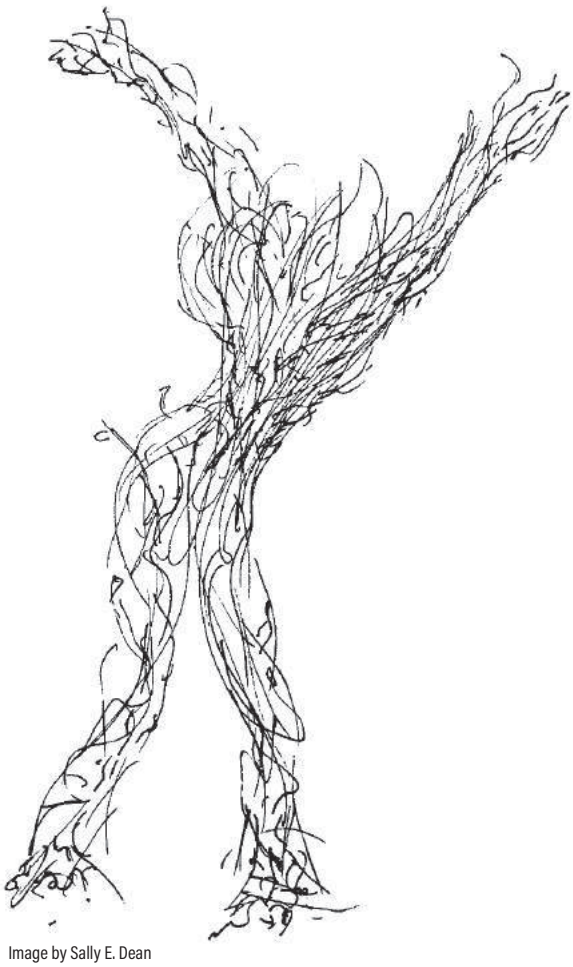

Image by Sally E. Dean

Sally: Integrating SRT and Amerta, I have begun to tap a multifaceted dance between body and image. Body and image can appear/disappear; breathing between material/immaterial landscapes, hovering between verbal/nonverbal realms, embodying and evoking sensation/imagination, received and activated through movement/stillness. The location of images shapes the moving body's experience—whether arising inside, outside, or in between body and image. Somatic Costumes are a bridge; when worn, a costume is experienced as inside the body through touch and outside the body through external form. Costume offers poetic materiality. Lastly, an image may be static or moving—alive. Image is always "in-forming" if it's alive. It never completes the process of "forming" itself.

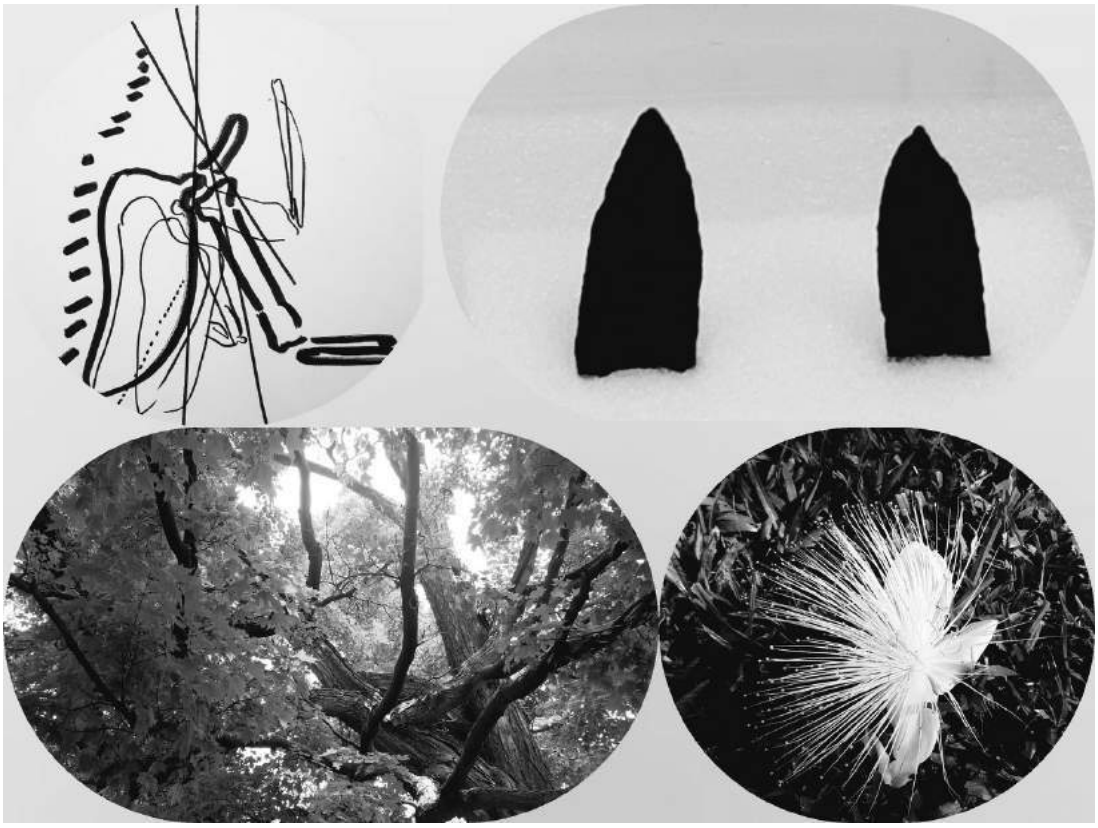

Image by Julie Nathanielsz

Julie: I hold the question of what fresh images arise while sitting in open attention to where-I-sit. In this, the technique of Skinner meets the river of Amerta, the genius of places speaking. A quality of seeing, wherein what is caught in the point of sight is received as itself doing the speaking. The mobile, angled bones of pelvis, shoulder, [index] finger, that reference self and world. Fluted points made by Gayogohono people, present and original inhabitants of this land. A specific image seems to live a long life within before taking form in the mouth.

comes to mind that playing is what gives us the ability to respond to surprise, so we end up surprised by something that is open, that is opening—something from outside of what we anticipate or remember in our experience. I do think about image and the play of image as being this unique and momentary confluence of implicit conscious memory and explicit memory, as the micro-fibers of memory momentarily come together and blossom inside myself or another. Kinesthetic experiences or life experiences, that each time it's new. I think this kind of image is very personal, and something about that action of the image in the dancer, in myself, is one of experiencing wholeness. That experience of my body as whole. And then also, at times, this thing occurs, which I connect with Skinner Releasing but is not unique to it, that is the interplay of self and context. The dissolution of distinction may be one area I get more of in Amerta. And I suspect that's because so much is there—being (moving) in nature, in human culture—that the immediacy of wind or of a dialogue with another has more than the tactile, which can also be the possibility of understanding…across distinctions or differences.

My sense of how image is working in Amerta feels very much about the sensations of the place, the questions of the place, where we are.

The way I understand "space" as an image in SRT is that it connects with bodily roots of knowing and possibility. I feel like the image of space is like an anchor that actually helps bridge back to something that the body knows.

Sally

There was something, when you were talking about "space," Julie, that I really relate to in connection with

Skinner Releasing. And then when I think about "image" with Amerta practice, I feel it's much more about the "place." With Skinner Releasing, I'm feeling an image and seeing it in my body as I'm moving. There is this clear poetic language given to me that I'm experiencing, and it's like I'm arriving in the space; my body feels the language somehow.

And then I have this memory of being on Prapto's land in Mojosongo. I remember moving, and all of a sudden it felt like my body was reappearing. I could sense my bones, and then all of a sudden my muscles, and then I could sense my breath kind of circulating in a completely different yet concrete way. Just moving in that place, the image appeared through the visceral and kinesthetic. "Image" isn't the first word I associate with Prapto's work, unless he does something very simple connected to the body: "feel your feet coming from the earth." Then it's more connected to my sense of the way I experience image work and Skinner Releasing. Instead, I experience Prapto's languaging and practices more like symbols. I'm given symbols: oval, circle, square. *[laughing]* They can be images, but they have all these layers of meaning that are related to place, culture, and an idea of the world. It affects my body through a different process.

Lily

Julie, you said the word "opening," and it's actually one of the main words that I usually connect to what I experience in using imagery and with Skinner Releasing. Opening, and opening into opening, this is how I've been developing my own imagery. And that has to do with "expanding." And I think there is something interesting; now that I have been practicing this approach for so long and it's in my daily practice, I'm connecting more to anatomical information. I'm more excited when I read some things about BMC [Body-Mind Centering] or craniosacral practice. I can tune into my own body more easily than before. It took me another process first to be able to make some kind of sense of it—that this is a natural fact… but, just to use words. I had to enter and tune in from another angle.

Margit

My experience of how I relate to embodiment has to do with qualities, texture, form, color, flow, and weight. These things are experiential, sensorial, or energetic. I've had experience through BMC, with what Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen calls "somatization," where you see a picture of the anatomic process, then you move with it, and it becomes understood through somatic integration. When you're practicing SRT, what actually is it that's being developed? How does the image develop? Is it material? Is it a quality for movement?

Lily

I used the word "connections" with Amerta, but I also feel that a lot in Skinner Releasing—this connection between my physical dancing body and what's beyond that, both inside and outside, and integrating; feeling the oneness of that.

Margit

How is that arising?

Lily

Perhaps one way is through the practice of integrating the inner awareness of an image and your relation to the outside so that both happen at the same time. So that these boundaries become thinner, or they may disappear. One area where I feel they are disappearing more is with what is called "a totality image"—where you merge with the image. So then there is this sense of oneness as well as differentiation and refinement within.

Margit

I think about how Prapto talks about sensory motor, not just sensory. Is kinesthetic experience bodily? What is the relationship between an image and something having form? How does an image get formed? From where does that form arise? There's a process of turning into something and coming into its clarity. Becoming formulated. And an image is just *maybe* the initiatory process from which that forming takes place.

Image by Lily Kiara

Lily: Pak Prapto speaks about "being perceived" while we dance. Indonesia helps with this. There is willingness to see me. I feel easily perceived. By the land, the green, by sea, the people who live there, by sky, path, ancestors, by tree and its long life, its intrinsic wisdom, by shells who washed ashore and resettled. By what is beyond all that. I am not alone. And through this I feel this is not about me. It never is. While simultaneously, by feeling perceived, I feel included. Being perceived expands any image of the dance. Even if there is no image. (Bali, 2017.)

Julie

When I think about my urge to make a dance, my idiosyncratic way that I want to make a dance is very often from some kind of image. The guidance often shows up from the specific image, and that is the placeholder of all the multiplicity of directions that I could go. It can just unfold, elaborate, and guide, to keep things from becoming just limitless; so it forms. So I get to find something out, and in Amerta work it seems to be "OK, but what are *you* going to do? What is your application?" In Releasing, I technically learn how to unfold, go inside of something; instead of being on the outside, I can go *in*. And then I can inhabit this space, and this was the transition for me in Releasing—the question was, "What is in the space?" And that seemed to be the propulsion from working with somebody else's images into beginning to recognize the presence of other images and what the quality of the image was so that it could be mined, or explored, or sat inside of. That feels like something that is a process of creation.

STREAMS

Margit

How is image developing through your own work? Where is the meaning for you now, and how is it filtered through these influences?

Sally

Developing the Somatic Costume work has been one of my key practices in developing my relationship to image: How can I guide myself/others between facts/fictions, the reality/dream world and the material/immaterial? Images became more material. For example, the Furry Heart Protector costume came from the poetry of nature and my moving body. When moving with stones on the beach I began putting stones on my body. Sensing the weight, the texture, the quality of the stones, I realized I needed something to protect my heart. I started making a costume by taping stones on the front and the back of my heart. In that process, I thought, "Ah, OK, I understand

when Prapto said 'Sally, please don't just sense the front of the heart; sense also the back of the heart and the place in between.'" With stones now on my body, I could experience what he was saying. The image was touching me.

Lily

For me it is in my daily practice, in my training. I literally start my day with going into an image in my body, and through that, the images develop; so it's not necessarily the image from Skinner Releasing, but it comes from there because it is what I've been practicing for so long. So the images are developing continuously through my daily practice. I also taught workshops where I used images that I developed further, from the practice and my teaching. This is something I do to be in tune with my body and with the world, with the reality of the imagination: the experience of expansion. Working with stillness has been deepened by my practice of SRT, particularly some images that I was very moved by in the beginning. Now, in my work, I am working more radically with stillness. So it's directly influencing my work.

Julie

I feel pretty far from Skinner Releasing, but if I can sort of credit what I feel, the tone of being in the world of image and movement, or image and action, connects with that sort of power to draw from multiple sources at once. My immediate response right now is personal; I'm writing, doing photography, mapping, and working with fabric. In my weekly practice of going outside and dancing continuously for one hour, the encounter is more with all of that memory but also the immediacy of ice, snow, wind, perfume, moments of performativity.

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ENDNOTE

[1] "The SRT images at the basic level fall into two categories: specific and totality imagery. An example of a specific is the image of marionette strings at the knees…designed to allow greater freedom in the hip socket. An example of a totality is the image of floating in a pool. Then the whole self merges with the pool—the outer edges of the self becoming the outer edges of the pool. At times the specific string image is integrated within the pool totality.… In a way, the imagination can be said to be actively improvising on the images that are given, making them relevant to the needs of the student's process at any given moment." Joan Skinner, Bridget Davis, Robert Davidson, Kris Wheeler, and Sally Metcalf, "Skinner Releasing Technique: Imagery and Its Application to Movement Training," *Contact Quarterly* Vol. 5 no. 1 (Fall 1979).

Further reading:
Bloom, Katya, Margit Galanter, and Sandra Reeve, eds. *Embodied Lives: Reflections on the Influence of Suprapto Suryodarmo and Amerta Movement.* Axminster, UK: Triarchy Press, 2014. *Available through Contact Editions.*

Morein, Andrea. "A Practice Called 'Road': Studying 'Movement in Meditation' with Suprapto Suryodarmo in Central Java." *Contact Quarterly* Vol. 19 no. 1 (Winter/Spring 1994).

Special thanks to Lisa Nelson for her collaboration on the Image Conversations project, of which the above conversation marks the first in the series. Thanks to Hanna Bredvig and Meredith Bove for transcribing the conversations. [M.G.]

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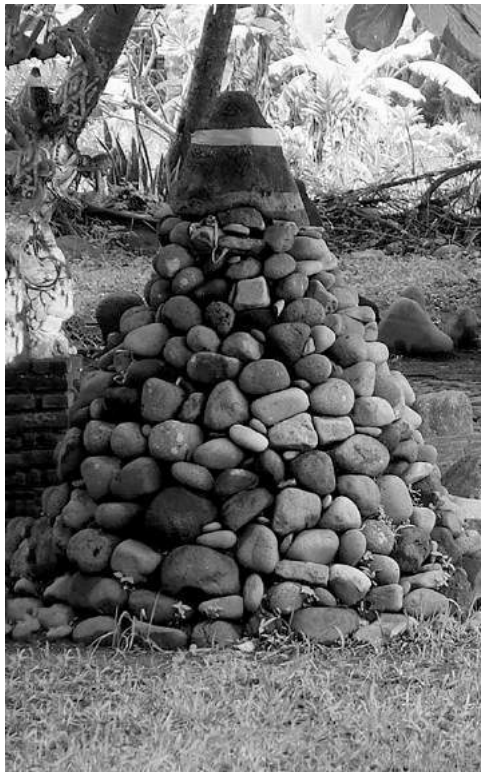

photo by Mary Peterson

[Detail of photo on page 45] One of several *tumpeng* (cone-shaped) offerings, or small mountains or stupa, a word born from the earth, in Prapto's Candi Teja Amerta art-temple-garden on the coast of Tejakula village in North Bali, 2017. [M.G.]